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ABSTRACT

The opinions of sophomore practicum students in elementary education at the University of Iowa were solicited with the intent of finding ways to assess and improve the teacher education program. The students answered a series of questions related to their experiences working in local public schools. Some of the most notable outcomes of the data were: (1) students should be allowed to observe at more than one grade level; (2) the practicum is of help in aiding students to decide whether or not they wish to continue in an education career; (3) human relations training may be overemphasized in the prepracticum coursework; (4) practicum students should be allowed to observe at more than one building site but be assigned to just one site; (5) students felt they needed more time working with groups of children rather than with individuals; and (6) grading should not be on a pass/fail basis. A sample of the questionnaire accompanies this document. (JD)

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ASSESSING THE PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE

KENT FREELAND

About the Questionnaire

The Division of Early Childhood and Elementary Education at the University of Iowa offers a pre-student teaching practicum for students in the Teacher Education Program. The semester practicum is normally taken in the sophomore year along with the foundation courses. Students taking the practicum work with children and teachers in elementary schools to help them assess their own potentialities and interests in teaching as a career.

A questionnaire (see Table 1) was devised to solicit opinions from practicum students at the end of their semester's work. Information from the questionnaire was obtained anonymously and was used to improve field experiences for students in the Teacher Education Program. Surveys such as this one need to be given frequently to help assess the efficacy of a practicum field experience. This questionnaire and its results can be used to provide ideas to other educators who are involved in teacher training and wish to evaluate the performance of their programs.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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TABLE 1
REACTION TO STATEMENTS BY PRACTICUM STUDENTS

			Degree of Agreement in Percent *				
	N	Mean	-2	-1	0	+1	+2
1. In the practicum experience you should be able to observe at more than one grade level.	22	1.50	0.0	0.0	4.6	40.9	54.5
2. My practicum experience helped me decide if I wanted to continue in education.	22	1.14	0.0	0.0	27.3	31.8	40.9
3. Overall my reaction to my practicum was very positive.	22	1.14	0.0	9.1	4.6	50.0	36.3
4. I had adequate help and supervision from my cooperating teacher.	22	1.09	4.6	4.6	9.0	40.9	40.9
5. My practicum placement matched my specific request in terms of grade level.	22	1.09	0.0	9.1	13.6	36.4	40.9
6. In the practicum experience you should be able to observe in more than one building.	22	1.05	0.0	4.5	9.1	63.7	22.7
7. My practicum placement matched my specific request in terms of building and location.	22	.77	4.5	4.5	27.3	36.4	27.3
8. I had adequate feedback from my cooperating teacher.	21	.76	9.5	14.3	9.5	23.8	42.9
9. I had adequate time to plan with my cooperating teacher.	22	.68	9.1	9.1	18.2	31.8	31.8
10. My cooperating teacher took the time to help me understand teaching and help me decide if I wanted to continue in education.	22	.55	9.1	13.6	18.2	31.8	27.3
11. I should have had more time working with children on an entire-class basis. (assuming full control of the classroom)	22	.45	4.5	18.2	22.7	36.4	18.2
12. More training in classroom management is needed before a practicum experience.	22	.41	0.0	18.2	36.4	31.8	13.6
13. I should have had more time working with children on a small-group basis.	22	.41	0.0	22.7	31.8	27.3	18.2
14. Contact time in the 7E:091 practicum should be increased.	20	.32	5.0	20.0	20.0	45.0	10.0
15. I feel I needed the principal's orientation session.	22	.32	4.5	13.6	31.8	45.6	4.5

TABLE 1 (Continued)
REACTION TO STATEMENTS BY PRACTICUM STUDENTS

	N	Mean	Degree of Agreement in Percent * -2	-1	0	+1	+2
16. I gained familiarity with the varied roles and responsibilities of the teacher from my practicum experience.	22	.27	9.1	22.8	13.6	40.9	13.6
17. In the practicum experience you should be placed at more than one grade level.	20	.10	5.0	25.0	30.0	35.0	5.0
18. More training in legal responsibilities is needed before a practicum experience.	21	.10	0.0	23.8	47.6	23.8	4.8
19. I felt that my University coordinator was available if I ever needed help.	22	0.00	0.0	9.1	13.6	36.4	40.9
20. More human relations training is needed before a practicum experience.	22	-.09	0.0	31.8	45.5	22.7	0.0
21. I felt that I spent too much time observing.	22	-.09	9.1	45.5	9.1	22.7	13.6
22. In the practicum experience you should be placed in more than one building.	22	-.14	9.1	22.7	40.9	27.3	0.0
23. I should have had more time working with children on a one-to-one basis.	22	-.18	9.1	40.9	18.2	22.7	9.1
24. Grading should be on a Pass/Fail basis.	22	-.23	22.7	22.7	22.7	18.2	13.7
25. I had a chance to listen to the building principal explain the school's philosophy and receive an orientation session.	22	-.68	31.8	36.4	9.1	13.6	9.1

* Degree of Agreement: -2 = strongly disagree; -1 = disagree;
0 = neutral; +1 = agree; +2 = strongly agree;

Evaluating the Results

Evaluation of the results of the questionnaire was done in this manner: " minus two points" was assigned to a strongly disagree response; "minus one point" to a disagree response; "zero points" to a neutral response; "plus one point" to an agree response; and "plus two points" to a strongly agree response. A point total was then computed for each statement with a high number indicating strong agreement.

The following ten paragraphs are arranged so that a conclusion based on a statement is followed by an implication. The paragraphs are based upon those six statements in Table 1 which received the highest ratings.

1A. It can be seen that the practicum students had the greatest leaning toward number 1 (In the practicum experience you should be able to observe at more than one grade level.)

1B. Apparently students were still trying to decide on the age of the children they would most enjoy working with. A practicum experience, then, should allow a student to observe a range of grade levels to familiarize himself or herself with abilities of children; development and growth of children; techniques of working with children; and methods of teaching children.

2A. The item receiving the second highest rating was number 2 (My practicum experience helped me decide if I wanted to continue in education.)

2B. The practicum experience can assist a student in making a career decision. Approximately five percent of the students who enroll in the practicum at the University of Iowa withdraw from the Teacher Education Program at the end of their practicum semester.

Statement 3 (Overall my reaction to my practicum was very positive.) and statement 4 (I had adequate help and supervision from my cooperating teacher.) indicated that the students felt (1) positive about the practicum experience and (2) adequate assistance from the cooperating (classroom) teacher was provided.

3B. One of the implied goals of the practicum experience is for the student to feel positive about the experience. Having an outstanding classroom cooperating teacher to give help and supervision is extremely important.

4A. If students requested a specific grade level, the placement supervisor tried to see that it was honored, as number 5 suggests (My practicum placement matched my specific request in terms of grade level.)

4B. Although students in this questionnaire appeared to want to select their assignments, several considerations should be noted. Can it be assumed that all students know what age children they would like to work with? Are they all capable of wisely choosing their own grade levels? Perhaps each practicum student should--as part of the program--be assigned to several different grade levels.

5A. Statement 6 (In the practicum experience you should be able to observe in more than one building.) reflects student preference for observing at more than one site.

5B. Statement 6 does not rank as high as statement 1. Although students seemed to desire observation in more than one grade level and in more than one building, the former received higher agreement.

The next twelve paragraphs are conclusions and implications taken from the six negative statements of Table 1. Statements 20 through 24 have means close to

the zero mark and therefore tend toward a neutral feeling by the practicum students. Only statement 25 indicates disagreement.

1A. Number 20 (More human relations training is needed before a practicum experience.) indicates that students did not feel they needed more human relations training before the practicum experience.

1B. This response was unexpected since human relations is an area that has received much attention in Teacher Education Programs in recent years. This sentiment should be followed up to determine if the students have indeed received sufficient training or if, instead, they are rejecting instructors, course organization, or course content.

2A. Number 21 (I felt that I spent too much time observing.) reveals that the practicum students did not feel that they spent an inordinate amount of time observing.

2B. Observation is an essential component of a field experience, but too much can make a student feel bored and useless. The students in this questionnaire apparently felt that the amount of time they spent observing was adequate and sufficient.

3A. Number 22 (In the practicum experience you should be placed in more than one building.) shows a high percent of neutral sentiment.

3B. This question reflected both a wide split in opinion plus a high incidence of "no opinion." Numbers 6 and 22 should be looked at together. It's possible that students would approve of observing in more than one building, but being assigned (as a home base) to just one building.

4A. Students indicated that they did not need more time working with children on a one-to-one basis. (Number 23: I should have had more time working with children on a one-to-one basis.)

4B. It might be inferred that the students felt a more pressing need to work with children in groups rather than on an individual basis.

5A. From number 24 (Grading should be on a Pass/Fail basis.), it can be concluded that students did not support a pass/fail grading system.

5B. Grading, in general, always presents aproblem. Pass/Fail is one method of assessing the completion of a practicum experience. However, the students in this questionnaire did not consider that to be a satisfactory method.

6A. Number 25 (I had a chance to listen to the building principal explain the school's philosophy and receive an orientation session.) shows that almost seventy percent of the students did not receive an introduction and orientation session by the building principal.

6B. An orientation session can often help a student in the practicum experience by providing information on the school's organization, practices, and personnel. An important consideration is whether open lines of communication have been established among the university practicum director, the university practicum supervisor, the building principal and the building cooperating teacher. Perhaps it was never clearly determined that an orientation session was to be given. Statement 15 indicated that over fifty percent of the practicum students felt they needed this orientation session.

The value of this article lies in the information it provides for those who direct practicum programs in Teacher Education Programs. Each college or university

needs to periodically conduct such surveys to (1) determine what pre- and post-practicum courses can be of most benefit; (2) determine what practicum experiences are most helpful to the students; (3) assist education majors in deciding if they are making the correct career choice; and (4) assess how beneficial public school personnel are in the practicum program.